Halcyon Days

VraieEsprit

Bleach

Complete

Created by FicLab

www.ficlab.com

Halcyon Days

VraieEsprit

Copyright Information

This ebook was automatically created by FicLab v1.0.110 on December 8th, 2024, based on content retrieved from www.fanfiction.net/s/4707585/.

The content in this book is copyrighted by VraieEsprit or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved unless explicitly stated otherwise. Please do not share or republish this work without the express permission of the copyright holder.

If you are the author or copyright holder, and would like further information about this ebook, please read the author FAQ at www.ficlab.com/author-faq.

This story was first published on December 10th, 2008, and was last updated on December 10th, 2008.

FicLab ID: _XeYakWr/m4g6cmug/10700E581

Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright Information
Table of Contents
Summary
1. Halcyon Days

Summary

title	Halcyon Days
author	VraieEsprit
source	https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4707585/
published	December 10th, 2008
updated	December 10th, 2008
words	6,352
chapters	1
status	Complete
rating	Fiction T
tags	Anime/Manga, Bleach, Byakuya K., Complete, Fanfiction, J. Ukitake

Description

Byakuya and Ukitake omake set the day after the showdown on Soukyoku Hill. Ukitake visits Byakuya in 4-Bantai and remembers another time long ago when they met under much more innocent circumstances. NB Best read AFTER chap 24 of Rain Dragon . Oneshot.

1. Halcyon Days

Halcyon Days

~A Byakuya and Ukitake oneshot~

*****NB** I uploaded this then deleted it but I've put it back since I know some folk have read it already and I don't want to be being unfair.***

It doesn't contain spoilers for Rain Dragon, but it is more appropriately read AFTER reading Chapter 24 of Rain Dragon, which will be uploaded at the weekend.

My apologies for the inconvenience.

It's always been my belief that, from the informal way Ukitake addresses Byakuya and the fact Byakuya doesn't generally disdain Ukitake like he does other people, these two have a long standing connection to one another. This was inspired by something random I had Ukitake say in the Rain Dragon story about Byakuya's childhood, and I was heartily encouraged to write an actual scene where it happens. So this is it. I guess you can consider it unofficially a Rain Dragon 'omake', coming somewhere before that story's beginning ;) since it connects to that just a little. I confess, I love speculating about Byakuya's past, especially since reading the Pendulum chapters!

To tie it into something tangible, the original context is the day after Aizen leaves Soul Society. Ukitake visits Byakuya in 4-Bantai's infirmary and is compelled to remember another meeting between the two of them, some several years earlier.

Yep, this is Byakuya and the Candyman ;)

As for all the Shihouin stuff — it's imaginary, but possible, surely…?

Heh,I need to stop writing oneshots and focus on Rain Dragon's conclusion :S

~Usual disclaimer — Bleach etc is copyright to Kubo Tite and this is just a random fanbabbling about what MAY have happened, not what actually did~

The air over Seireitei was still that morning.

Ukitake made his way slowly through the halls of 4-Bantai, a pensive expression on his thin, sallow features as he negotiated the bustling clusters of rescue squad Shinigami as they went about their duties, harried and overworked as they struggled to cope with the sheer demand for medical care that the previous day had thrown on them.

It had been a long and terrible day for Soul Society in many ways, Ukitake reflected. Yet even so, in the midst of all the darkness, there had been several small rays of light. True, three of their trusted Captains had betrayed them. They had stolen a powerful, dangerous treasure and absconded into the world of the Hollows. But Soul Society, which could easily have been devastated by their treason, still stood strong. Walls had been broken, but not lives, and for this Ukitake was eternally grateful. From the young member of his own squad whose execution had been reprieved to the various patients currently inhabiting 4-Bantai's every spare bed, now was the time to heal.

He paused outside one door, hesitating for a moment, then placing his hand gently against the wood, pushing it back and slipping inside.

Within was peaceful, a small yet easily furnished solitary chamber with one bed alongside the window, a chair and a further cabinet for necessary affairs that stood opposite. It was not overly elaborate, nor was it the normal kind of place that a noble son of the highest ranking clan in Seireitei would have chosen to spend his time. Yet even so, when injuries were involved, Unohana Retsu had never been one to place ceremony before necessity. This wing was, after all, in close contact with the offices belonging to 4-Bantai's highest ranking Shinigami, and Ukitake knew from his own past experience that it was reserved not for the most well-born patients but for those with the most severe condition.

And Ukitake knew that currently the wing held three occupants. Hitsugaya Toushirou, Hinamori Momo, and Kuchiki Byakuya.

The fourth, 6-Bantai's Vice Captain Abarai Renji had been moved down to a different level following his emergency treatment, and his condition had not been so serious in the first place. Yet Ukitake knew that, in the case of the three others, there had been genuine fear for their lives.

Even now, Hinamori lay in a deep coma in the room across the hall, and as Ukitake made his way across the chamber to the bedside, he

frowned, interpreting the feeble flickering of the patient's reiatsu as he did so.

"Well, you really pushed yourself this time, didn't you, Byakuya?" He murmured softly, sinking down beside the bed. "Were you really in such a hurry to join Hisana that you threw yourself in front of Ichimaru's blade?"

There was no answer, for the 6-Bantai Captain was still recovering from intensive surgery, and Ukitake knew that his system was still heavy with Unohana's own particular brand of sedatory medication. In some ways, Ukitake reflected ruefully, this was for the best. After all, Byakuya was not one who had ever been accustomed to being told what to do, and Ukitake was sure that he made an easier patient if he was kept quiet and half-asleep whilst the worst of his wounds were allowed to close.

A faint smile touched Ukitake's lips.

"So the impulsive young rascal still exists inside of you after all, Byakuya-kun." He reflected absently. "I wondered, you know, if it did. Since Hisana died, you've not shown that face to the world. You were so cold, so dismissive about your sister's fate that I almost thought myself that you'd closed yourself off completely to anything and everything around you. But to do something so reckless… at the last minute, to charge in and save her by putting yourself in mortal danger…"

He pursed his lips.

"Is it wrong, to be relieved that you'd do such a thing?" He wondered. "That in the end, the Kuchiki-ke clan leadership hasn't completely swallowed up the spirit inside of you? I was afraid Hisana's death had destroyed any hope of you being true to yourself and your feelings… but perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps, after all, Rukia will be the one who'll manage to make you open up. Somehow."

He sat back in his seat, contemplating, and a wistful smile touched his features.

"If Ginrei were here, what would he say to you?" He murmured aloud. "That you'd been reckless and foolish, leaving things to the last minute? That a Kuchiki didn't act with such impulsiveness, but planned things out carefully before acting with precision and clarity? Probably all of those and more. That you should have obeyed the rules? I don't know. You always did take things so seriously, after all. Even as a boy — things were one way or they were another. That's your great fault, in the end. That sometimes you don't let yourself see

the shades of grey."

He glanced across the chamber, taking in the battered remains of Byakuya's sword as he did so. Senbonzakura was also healing, he knew, and it had reformed into its original shape after the battle, yet it was tarnished and tainted by the ferocity of his fight with Kurosaki Ichigo, and Ukitake knew that until Byakuya regained his own strength, Senbonzakura would remain in this sorry state.

Nearby, the Captain's white *haori*, cleaned of blood and damage from the fight hung on a hook, and at the sight of it, Ukitake ran his fingers along the sleeve of his own coat, a pensive expression entering his brown eyes.

"And you always did want so much to wear that, didn't you." He mused. "Even though you didn't understand then all the burdens you do now. I'm sorry, in the end, that I've not been able to lighten them any for you. I know when Ginrei passed away, I promised him to always be a port of call for you, should you need me. You trusted me with Rukia, but you've not trusted me with your inner thoughts. I miss that hot-headed directness you used to have, in truth. Losing your wife, losing your Grandfather, all within a space of less than two years… I know what kind of a loss that was and that it must have weighed heavily on your heart. But life is about loss and gain, in the end. And if you only let things go, in the end the thing you most lose is yourself."

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully, as memories of an encounter long before touched at his thoughts.

"So the matter is finally shelved, then."

Ukitake got slowly to his feet, casting his companion a smile.

"Thank you, Ginrei. Sometimes just having the will of the Kuchiki-ke on your side is enough to sway a debate in the right direction — silly as it may seem."

"Never underestimate the power of the Great Noble Families." Ginrei said solemnly. "Besides which, Juushirou, you should never worry about coming to me for a favour. Besides, in this particular instance, I was happy to help out. It's a delicate balance of power, sometimes, within the Gotei-13. If one or two Captains get the option to step out of line…"

He paused meaningfully, and Ukitake nodded his head.

"Yes." He said heavily. "And the newest Captain of 2-Bantai appears to be one such individual. Though I know I should not say such things, even behind closed doors… about a member of the Shihouin clan."

"Between you and I, Juushirou, you can say what you like." Ginrei said frankly. "My family and the Shihouin have had an uneasy friendship since the dawn of time, so it seems. Well, you know that well enough, after all. You've been around long enough to see the various spars and fights for power. They've never quite superceded us — and it's caused any number of clan heads any amount of grief to remind them of that fact."

He smiled.

"You needn't worry about them so long as I'm head of 6-Bantai." He added. "When the seek to disturb the peace and quiet in Seireitei by taking the law into their own hands, that's a time when all Captains should be ready to strike, regardless of their standing."

"So it is." Ukitake agreed ruefully. "It seemed to me to be a ridiculous reasoning, in any case. To deny the admission of a Vice Captain candidate simply on the grounds of their background. It's not as though it was even 2-Bantai's decision to make, after all… the poor young lad has done nothing except work his socks off to get to that point. So what if his birth was inauspicious and whispered about behind closed doors? It doesn't matter if he has the reiryoku to do the job."

"I think you'll find that the problem is deeper in the Shihouin clan than that." Ginrei said wisely. "The child in question, after all, is the illegitimate offspring of one of the 2-Bantai's Captain's close female relatives. And they've worked very hard to hush that matter up. Especially now they're grooming young Yoruichi in the ways of the family. She's already an unusual child in many respects, so it seems, spending much of her time away from the estate and in the company of another young rascal. With that already troubling for the elders, it wouldn't do them any good at all for such information to leak out."

"So its as personal as that?" Ukitake's eyes narrowed. "I see. Ginrei, you didn't perhaps intervene in this by threatening to reveal that fact across Seireitei, did you?"

"It may have been a bargaining chip I kept in case of need." Ginrei said frankly, though there was a twinkle in his eye. "For the boy's sake, though, I didn't make the threat directly. Just the fact they know we Kuchiki know of the matter is enough. After all, it was the Kuchiki who were called upon to help cover it up, when the incident occured. The records relating to the boy's birth had to be carefully handled, after all. So in that respect, they know that we know too much. And if they had tried to rid themselves of the boy — if something had befallen him — the secret would be out. That was the deal we made with them, at the time. That the boy would be raised away from the Shihouin with no knowledge of his true roots, and we would cover the records to protect the clan. But his life would not be interfered

with… if it was, we would break our silence and speak out."

"The upper nobility are too crafty, sometimes, for my mind to follow." Ukitake reflected, and Ginrei shook his head.

"Don't give me that." He scolded. "I know you're as capable as I am of changing things to suit you, if need be. Besides, you flew to the youngster's defence when the application was first refuted, didn't you? You had a vested interest in it from the start."

"I had no idea it was so complicated, but yes." Ukitake admitted. "I strongly believe that the Gotei-13 should be built from ability, not simply prestige. And I'll stand by that, so long as I'm a Captain wearing this haori."

"Yes, that's why I find your company refreshing." Ginrei responded. "You and Shunsui both, for that matter. There's an honesty about you that sometimes seems apart from some of the others within the Gotei-13."

"I hope that's not the case." Ukitake said sincerely. "But I'll take the compliment anyway."

"Ojiisama?"

Before Ginrei could respond, the sliding door at the back of the chamber was pushed back, and Ukitake raised his head, his eyes widening as he registered the intruder. In the doorway, shadowed somewhat by the light from the hall beyond stood a small boy, no older than four or five years, his sleek dark hair pulled back in a tail behind his head and his grey eyes fixed on Ukitake with an equal amount of curiosity. Though it was clear, even at this age that the ghost of the Kuchiki clan features were already traced across his face, there was something guilelessly innocent in the small boy's gaze, and Ukitake found himself smiling as Ginrei gestured for the child to enter.

"Well, Byakuya-kun, it's been a while since I've seen you." Ukitake said softly, and at the sound of his name, Byakuya stiffened, staring at Ukitake with a glint of childish affront in his slate grey gaze.

"I'm not Byakuya-kun." He said frankly. "I'm Kuchiki *Byakuya."*

"Byakuya, enough." Ginrei held up his hand, shaking his head slowly. "Ukitake is a colleague of mine — and that's no way to greet a guest to the Kuchiki manor."

Byakuya's eyes narrowed, and he pursed his lips, eying Ukitake up and down as though trying to work out what kind of person the newcomer was. Though he was doing his best to be discerning and noble in his gesture, there was something endearingly childish about it, and Ukitake stifled a

grin. As he did so, he noticed for the first time that over the impeccable cut of the infant's expensive clan clothing an old white towel had been loosely tied, and his eyebrows raised slightly as he took in the wooden sword strapped haphazardly around the child's waist.

"I see. So your grandson is already preparing for the day when he takes the haori*, is he?"*

Ginrei sighed heavily, and Ukitake got the feeling that the matter had been much discussed between Grandfather and grandson already as he nodded his head.

"I'm going to be head of the Kuchiki clan and Captain of 6-Bantai one day." The youngster piped in importantly at this juncture, puffing out his young chest as he made his bold claims.

Despite himself, Ukitake could not completely stifle his amusement, and at the sign of it, Byakuya bristled once more.

"You can't laugh at me." He protested. "I'm a Kuchiki. It's not polite to laugh at a Kuchiki!"

"Byakuya, I already said, enough." Ginrei said firmly. "You're being very rude, and I won't have it."

"But he was laughing *at me." Byakuya folded his arms, looking sullen and as self-righteous as was possible for a four year old wearing a dusty white towel as a shawl to be. "And you said that noone can ever mock the Kuchiki-ke, because we're more important than any of the other clans. Everyone else is below us, so they have to look up to us. Don't they, Grandfather? That's what being a Kuchiki means!"*

Ginrei closed his eyes briefly, then,

"Our visitor is Ukitake Juushirou." He said softly. "A fellow Captain of the Gotei-13. He is an ally, Byakuya — and one you'd do well to keep in mind, since he's been a help to our clan many times over the past years. The Ukitake family have often supported the Kuchiki clan in the past, and Ukitake is particularly reliable in that regard. Besides, as you see, he too wears a haori*, just like I do. In that respect, he holds the same authority as I do. And so you should treat him so."*

Byakuya's eyes narrowed warily and he examined Ukitake again.

"Ukitake Juushirou?" He asked slowly, and Ukitake nodded his head.

"The last time I saw you, you were much smaller than you are now." He said genially. "And you were taking a nap, so we never had a chance to speak. It's nice to finally meet you, Kuchiki Byakuya-kun."

Byakuya reddened at this, indignation glittering in his eyes.

"You can't just come and stare at people when they're asleep." He objected. "Besides, I'm not a baby now. So I don't sleep in the day any more."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you." Ukitake smiled. "And I can see myself that you're becoming quite the young noble prince, now. You have the look of a Kuchiki about you, Byakuya-kun. I can see it in your face and in your eyes — there's no mistaking which clan you belong to."

Byakuya seemed somewhat mollified by this, his cheeks returning to their normal light colouring as he pursed his lips.

"Are your family nobles too, then?" He asked curiously, and Ukitake nodded.

"In a manner of speaking." He agreed. "Yes. I was born in Seireitei, just like you."

"But not one of the Five Great Houses?"

"No, not one of those." Ukitake shook his head.

"Then why do I need to be polite to him, Ojiisama?" Byakuya turned plaintive eyes on his guardian. "If he's not as important as the Kuchiki-ke, why can he call you 'Ginrei' and me 'Byakuya-kun'? Surely, if he's not from one of those families, he shouldn't be able to address us so familiarly?"

"Because Ukitake has been a Captain of the Gotei-13 for almost two thousand years." Ginrei said lightly. "And he has garnered much respect in that time, from all levels of society. He was not born our equal, perhaps that's true. But his influence is probably equal to ours these days through his hard work, if not through his birthright. He is someone you would do well not to offend, I think… even though you are so young, I won't have you disrespecting people who may one day be your colleagues and comrades."

"It's all right, Ginrei." Ukitake held up his hands. "The boy is refreshingly honest — and far from mistaken — in his understanding of noble society, after all. You're not wrong, Byakuya-kun. My birth is not equal to yours, so in that sense I shouldn't speak to you so familiarly, and perhaps you think that my manner of doing so is rude. But I hope you'll forgive me for it nonetheless. Your grandfather is a close friend of mine, and so I mean no offence by it, after all."

He eyed the child keenly.

"How old are you now, in any case? Four, is it? Or are you five?"

"I'll be five when the moon changes." Byakuya said importantly, spreading the tiny, chubby fingers on his right hand and holding them up proudly as he did so. "When the night turns white again, that's when I'll be five."

"When the night…?" Ukitake faltered, glancing at Ginrei in confusion, and Ginrei smiled.

"Byakuya was born the same night snow covered the mountains." He said softly. "Where my son and daughter-in-law were staying, in a distant Kuchiki manor, he took his first breaths. My son told me that they named him Byakuya, because the frozen ground glittered like a diamond in the light of a full moon that night."

He pursed his lips pensively.

"My daughter-in-law would have liked that to have been the true meaning of the boy's name." He added reflectively. "But the clan felt that it would somehow lack in dignity or prestige if a Kuchiki child of Byakuya's birthline was named after a common weather phenomenon and not a noble ancestor. My son reached the compromise of changing the kanji in order to better settle the family's reservations. But I remember that that was their original reasoning for choosing it. It was a truly 'white night', by all accounts."

"I see." Ukitake's expression cleared. "It's a fine name, either way. A name that suits you very well, I think, Byakuya-kun."

Byakuya nodded, shuffling towards the visitor, and Ukitake found himself hard pressed not to smile again as the young boy's would-be haori *trailed behind him on the floor like a mournful wedding veil.*

"Are you really two thousand years old?" He asked curiously, and Ginrei let out a heavy sigh, even as Ukitake started at the directness of the question. He quickly gathered himself, however, nodding his head.

"More or less." He agreed lightly. "Does that seem like a long time to you?"

"You don't look like a fossil." Byakuya seemed to be working this out for himself.

"Byakuya!" *Ginrei looked mortified, and despite himself Ukitake chuckled.*

"I take that as a compliment too, then." He said playfully, resting a pale hand on the child's tiny shoulder. "Thank you, Byakuya. I appreciate your honest opinion."

"Byakuya, what did I tell you about saying the first thing that came into

your mind?" Ginrei asked, a pained expression in his grey eyes, and Byakuya turned, genuinely confused by his grandfather's distress.

"Did I say something bad, then?" He asked, bewildered. "I only said that he didn't look like he was a fossil. Jirohi told me that the rocks with shells and patterns in the gardens are fossils because they were alive thousands of years ago. Ukitake-san was alive then too, but he doesn't look all old and chipped like they do. That's all. Jirohi said that they turned to stone because they were so old, but Ukitake-san isn't turned to stone. So Jirohi was wrong."

Ginrei stared at his grandson, momentarily speechless by this infant logic, and Ukitake shook his head in amusement.

"Ginrei, I don't think you should try and curb the things he wants to say." He murmured, only just keeping from bursting into full blown laughter. "He seems unusually honest and open for a member of the Kuchiki clan and I think you should cultivate that as much as possible."

"You're being harsh on my clan again, Ukitake."

"Yes, I know." Ukitake nodded. "But I'm serious, as it happens."

He eyed Byakuya keenly.

"Perhaps the way in which he says it needs to be worked on." He admitted. "But he has spirit and passion and I think that's a good characteristic for a young boy to have. Especially one who will one day wear the haori*."*

He touched the child's towel for a moment, then smiled. "Don't you think so too, Byakuya-kun?"

"I…" Despite himself, Byakuya faltered, and Ukitake carefully slipped off his white coat, kneeling on the floor to meet the boy at eye level as he gently draped the haori *over the child's shoulders.*

"There." He murmured. "Now you can see what it feels like for real, can't you? Well, Byakuya-taichou? What do you think? Are you ready to be Captain of the Gotei-13?"

Byakuya stared at him for a moment, then a tiny smile twitched at the corners of his mouth, and he nodded, fingering the edge of the fabric as he did so.

"Yes." He said thoughtfully. "Although it would be better if the number on the back was 'roku'. *I don't like* 'juusan'. *It's not the Kuchiki-ke's number."*

"No, true enough." Ukitake agreed, sitting back on his heels to admire

his handiwork. "And perhaps we need to find you one that's more your size — that one rather dwarfs you, I think."

"Well, I'm not the same size as you." Byakuya said seriously. "That's why, so it can't be helped."

"I can't believe you're encouraging him, Ukitake." Ginrei sounded resigned, and Ukitake spread his hands.

"I can't help it. I come from a big family." He said sheepishly. "I miss it, sometimes, being at the heart of something like that. And it's not as though I'll ever have children of my own, so…"

"Why not?" Byakuya started at this, staring at Ukitake in surprise. "You're a noble, after all, aren't you? Even your family has children too, right?"

"Byakuya, you're asking impertinent questions again." Ginrei warned, but Byakuya was not to be dissuaded.

"All noble families have to have heirs or they die, don't they?" He asked quizzically. "If you're a noble too, Ukitake-san, why don't you want to have children? Why do you want your family to die? I don't understand. Even if you're not as important as the Kuchiki family — do you hate your family so much that you want them to all die?"

"Families don't start dying because noone has any children, Byakuya-kun." Ukitake shook his head gravely.

"But Ojiisama said…"

"What he meant was that, if there aren't children to carry on the line, eventually the family won't exist any more." Ukitake smiled. "That's all. And there are plenty of people in my family to carry on the line. I have seven younger brothers and sisters, after all. The Ukitake family is quite happy without my help."

"But…" Byakuya frowned, shaking his head. "I'm going to be head of the Kuchiki clan, because I was Otousama's eldest son, and Otousama was Ojiisama's eldest son, and Ojiisama is head of the clan now. If you're the oldest, isn't it your duty to be head of the clan too?"

Ukitake was silent for a moment. Then he shook his head.

"I won't have children." He said sadly and at the genuine innocence in Byakuya's inquisitive young eyes, he felt a flicker of wistful regret stir in his heart. "I decided that a long time ago, when I gave my all to becoming a Captain of the Gotei-13. You see, Byakuya-kun, I have a disease. And it's not a disease that people can catch, but if I was to have children… they might inherit it, just like you've inherited your grey eyes and your fine

features from your father. And if that happened, I wouldn't be able to forgive myself. So it's better this way. That's all."

Byakuya pursed his lips, seemingly digesting this piece of information, and Ginrei rested his hand on the boy's head.

"Not everything is as simple and clear cut as it first seems." He murmured. "You've made Ukitake upset, now, by asking such searching questions. That's when it becomes more than curiosity, Byakuya… and becomes rudeness. Do you understand? Even if you want to know about something, sometimes it's not the right time to ask."

Byakuya looked startled, staring at his guardian in dismay, and Ukitake held up his hands, shaking his head.

"He didn't upset me." He assured his comrade quickly. "He only wanted to know. And I didn't mind telling him. He's intelligent, after all. I think he understood."

"Too intelligent, sometimes, for his own good." Ginrei admitted.

"I'm going to be the most powerful Kuchiki-ke leader there's ever been." Byakuya added, not seemingly put out by this observation. "Because I have special rei… rei… rei-roku, and…"

*"*Reiryoku*." Ginrei corrected gently, and Byakuya nodded importantly.*

"Yes. That." He agreed. "And so I'm going to be the best captain of 6-Bantai there's ever been, and the best Kuchiki-ke head, and the best everything. Because Ojiisama's going to teach me how."

"You couldn't have a better teacher." Ukitake told him. "Your grandfather is a very well respected man. And not just because he's a Kuchiki, either. Because he's a fine Captain and people look up to him. If you try to be like that as you grow, Byakuya-kun, you won't go far wrong."

He smiled, getting to his feet and retrieving his haori*, sliding it back over his shoulders.*

"Forgive me, but there's a chill in this room and my chest won't forgive me if I let it catch cold." He said ruefully. "However, I'll give you something in return, how's that?"

"In return?" Byakuya stared at him, and Ukitake nodded, sliding his hand into the folds of his hakama *and producing a rolled up bag of sweets.*

"I brought these with the intention of leaving them with your grandfather for you, but I might as well give them to you directly." He said amiably. "You do *like candy, I trust?"*

For the briefest of instants, Byakuya's air of Kuchiki greatness was shattered as his eyes lit up with all the eagerness of any young boy when presented with a special treat, and Ginrei laughed.

"I think you said the magic word." He said wryly. "He'll spoil his teeth and his dinner, but like all young boys he has a weakness for sweet things."

"Then I'm glad I thought of it." Ukitake held the bag out, and it was all Byakuya could do not to grab it with eager paws. He seemed to remember at the last minute, however, who and where he was, so instead he accepted it gracefully, bowing his head formally towards the 13-Bantai Captain in an impressively solemn gesture.

"Thank you, Ukitake-san. I'm very grateful." He said seriously, and Ukitake bit his lip, trying his hardest not to laugh at the image of such formality from such a young, towel-clad infant.

"You're most welcome, Byakuya-kun." He said instead. "And I'll remember, so that next time I come, I won't forget to bring you something else. All right?"

Byakuya eyed him for a moment. Then he smiled, nodding his head.

"I understand now why you're Ojiisama's good friend." He said frankly. "I'm sorry if I was rude, Ukitake-san."

"For a Kuchiki, my boy, you're far too easily won over." Ginrei reflected. "But I suppose, if it's Ukitake, it's all right if you are. Like I said, he's a good ally to have."

"Likewise, I hope to continue good relations with the Kuchiki-ke from hereon in." Ukitake smiled. "With all generations of it, too, if possible."

He glanced at Byakuya once more, the wistfulness stirring faintly in his heart a second time.

"After all, young life is a gift that should be treasured." He said evenly. "And nurtured into the adults of tomorrow. With Byakuya, that's especially important. One day, a lot will rest on his shoulders. And if I can be any help in shouldering that burden, Ginrei — for him or for you — you only have to ask."

"Uki..take?"

A faint voice from the bed started Ukitake from his reverie, and he turned, meeting the same slate-grey eyes that he had seen only moments earlier in his recollections. They were very different now, he mused, no longer open and innocent but clouded and troubled with pain and worry, and despite himself, the 13-Bantai Captain felt sad.

“Growing up is such a painful reality, in the end, isn’t it, Byakuya-kun?” He murmured softly, and a flicker of confusion crossed the patient’s tired gaze.

“Why… are you… here?”

“To make sure that you’re in one piece, of course.” Ukitake said frankly. “You’re not the only one who takes promises seriously, after all. Ginrei wouldn’t forgive me, if anything happened to you.”

“Even… if I had… died… it would not… have sufficed.” Byakuya said softly, and Ukitake snorted, shaking his head.

“Your sister feels differently.” He said frankly, getting to his feet and placing his hand gently on his companion’s uninjured shoulder. “Listen. You’re weak now, and you should rest, so that you heal quickly and return to the people who need you. Your Vice Captain will soon regain his fitness, and be able to lead your squad in the meantime, but I’ll look in on them too, till then, so you won’t have anything to worry about in that regard. Rukia, too, you can entrust to me. So put your mind to healing, my boy. In all ways, not just in body. We all make mistakes of judgement, after all. All we can do now is try to repair them.”

Byakuya’s eyes closed once more, and he didn’t attempt to respond, but from the steadying of his reiatsu, Ukitake knew that the young man had understood his meaning, and he nodded, satisfied.

“I can tell you’re ill, when you accept instructions so meekly.” He reflected. “But your life is not in immediate danger any more. And whether you feel you deserved to die or not, you didn’t. That means you’ve a chance to make amends properly where that girl is concerned. That’s what Hisana would have wanted you to do, after all, isn’t it?”

Byakuya’s eyes snapped open at this, and Ukitake nodded again.

“Yes, I understand exactly where your thoughts are.” He said softly. “I’m an old man and I’ve seen many things. And I’ve known you almost your whole life, so you’ll find it difficult to conceal things from me. Even if you want to. You may be head of the Kuchiki clan now, but you’re still Ginrei’s Byakuya-kun to me, too, somewhere in my mind.”

“I’m… not… Byakuya-kun. I’m… *Kuchiki*… Byakuya.”

A faint smile touched Byakuya’s lips as he met his colleague’s gaze. It was gone in an instant, but Ukitake had seen it, and he grinned.

“So you are.” He murmured. “Well, and we all have our burdens to bear. I’ll let you sleep. And I’ll tell your sister that your condition improves. No doubt she’ll come and see you herself soon enough. She’s very anxious about you, after all.”

“About… me?” Byakuya looked startled, and Ukitake nodded.

“It’s time you started over.” He said gently. “For Hisana’s sake, as well as yours and hers. There’s a lot to be gained, after all, from having Rukia in your life. You know it too, I think. And Hisana didn’t want to leave you alone, in the end. That’s why she wanted you to find Rukia. So that even when she was gone, you wouldn’t have to be alone — and nor would Rukia be, either. You’d have each other.”

Byakuya’s eyes widened at this, and Ukitake spread his hands.

“You think on that for a while.” He suggested. “Sleep on it, and see how it seems when you wake. But I’m sure of it, Byakuya. Hisana was, after all, that kind of woman. And she loved you — both of you, I think — very much indeed.”

With that he turned on his heel, softly leaving the chamber and sliding the door shut behind him.

“Hisana is a memory he still has to face and deal with properly, if he’s going to ever have a relationship with Rukia at all.” He mused. “But maybe, now, it can begin. Maybe, in all of this betrayal and pain, there is that one faint slither of light for the Kuchiki-ke. That, at long last, bonds that should have already been strengthened will, finally, have their chance to put down proper roots.”

———

Byakuya’s name kanji actually means “White” and “?”. Which amuses me a little bit. They can’t have done that on purpose… surely…

Edit to add: Please could people ***stop*** *contacting me/reviewing to suggest/let me know what Byakuya’s kanji means? It means what I said above —* ***‘white’*** *and* ***‘question mark’*** *(or?). In Japanese there are numerous kanji that can be read in the same way and though they sound the same and look the same when written in our characters, in Japan they are written completely differently.*

Though ‘night’ 夜 would have been nice, and arrow 矢 would have been pretty, the kanji is actually 白哉。 Sorry to anyone I have confused along the way but I do read Japanese and the? is the actual meaning of the second kanji, not me not knowing the character!!